THE FELLĀḤĪN OF UPPER EGYPT

Thus a man normally of a quiet, gentle, and peaceful disposition may on the spur of the moment commit some brutal murder. One year when I was staying in a small, out-of-the-way village in Upper Egypt a man killed a neighbour in a terrible way because he had stolen some onions from his (the murderer's) field. The moment after he had committed the crime he was weeping over the body of his victim!

One of the besetting sins of the Egyptian *fellāḥīn* is jealousy, which often becomes such a raging passion that a jealous man or

FIG. 3. THE FACE OF "THE MOUNTAIN" AND ENTRANCES TO ANCIENT TOMB-CHAPELS

woman is rendered capable of committing any violent crime. The women are liable to be jealous of one another's children, the wives about their husbands, the men of each other's prosperity or position, and so on to an endless degree. I do not wish to imply that jealousy is uncommon in other parts of the world, but I certainly think that it has a large share in the general make-up of the Egyptian character.

Again, the love of money tends to make them very avaricious, and is the cause of many serious troubles among them. On the other hand, they are capable of, and often actually perform, most generous actions, both in the giving of money and in the forgiveness of an injury. Quarrels between individuals, occasionally very violent ones, are common in the villages, but if a judicious

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
MR13 Fellahin MR13
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and on the exact site of the crime. Moreover, the same number of knots was tied in the handkerchief used by the avenger as had been tied in the handkerchief used by the original murderer.

On another occasion the train in which I was travelling stopped close to a certain village in Middle Egypt. I noticed that the place was in great commotion; crowds of people had collected in the streets, and there were two or three motors drawn up, evidently belonging to Government officials. In a palm-grove opposite the village were groups of people, mostly women, seated round objects covered up with black cloaks such as are often worn by the men. Presently my servant came to the door of my carriage to tell me what was the matter. His information, collected from various persons on the spot, was practically the same as what I was told later by the officials themselves. It seems that in the village in question there is a long-standing feud between two families, one of which is weak, the other strong. About eight months previously the strong family had fought with the weaker one, and had either killed or severely wounded—I forget which—some of its members. The weak family was not in a position to take immediate revenge, but bided its time, determining to retaliate sooner or later. During the night before my visit fifteen members of the more powerful family had been out in their fields, as water had been turned on for irrigation purposes. It is always necessary on these occasions to see that the water is conducted into the proper channels, and also that no one steals it by altering its course. The men thus employed were widely separated from each other, and during their watch they all fell asleep. The weaker family knew that this might well happen and so give them the long-desired opportunity of taking their revenge. A number of them, therefore, set off from the village at night, and, creeping up to their sleeping enemies, beat them so severely with *nabābīt* that those they did not kill outright they injured so terribly that they were not expected to live—I never heard definitely how many actually were killed, though one rumour, happily an exaggeration, I believe, put the number as high as twelve.

The law of blood-revenge is one of the greatest obstacles to justice with which the police officials have to contend. It is most difficult to obtain evidence, because the witnesses know that, should what they say result in a criminal's conviction, his relatives will certainly take revenge. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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CHAPTER X

AGRICULTURE AND HARVEST RITES

THE wealth and prosperity of Egypt is, and always has been, dependent upon the produce of the soil, and the peasants are before everything else agriculturalists, as is also indicated by the Egyptian Arabic word for peasant—*felläḥ* (plural *felläḥīn*), meaning one who digs or tills. The peasants, most of whom are quite illiterate, are remarkably clever agriculturalists, and every young boy is well versed in all that pertains to the cultivation of the soil. Their methods are, for the most part, very primitive, though, of course, the present system of storing water and of distributing it over various districts has been adopted comparatively recently, and to maintain it a number of highly trained engineers are required. This book is not concerned with these modern developments, which, indeed, lie beyond the scope of anthropology, but with the ordinary work in the fields, where ancient methods and ancient implements are still largely employed, and ancient customs are still observed.

The cultivated lands in Egypt lie along either bank of the river, without any apparent boundaries, for there are no hedges to divide the fields as in England. To the eye of the ordinary traveller there is nothing to indicate where one man's property ends and another's begins. The fields are broken up into small squares, separated from each other by ridges of earth and narrow trenches. When water is distributed over a given area it is conducted through the trenches into the square plots by making an opening through the ridges which surround them. When the plots have received their due allowance of water the openings are built up again and the stream is directed to another portion of the land.

The greater number of the peasants own or hire small plots which are marked off one from the other by boundary stones stuck into the ground at intervals of six feet or more. Many a village quarrel has arisen over these stones, the removal of a neighbour's landmark being a constant cause of disturbance. If a man, for

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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instance, thinks he would like to add to his own property by stealing a portion of his neighbour's he will surreptitiously shift his boundary stones farther on to the adjoining land. This is, of course, quickly detected by the man whose land has been encroached upon, and a bitter dispute will follow, which may end in a violent quarrel.

The plough which is in common use at the present day is a primitive, but quite adequate, machine (Fig. 97). It is made entirely of wood, with the exception of the share, which is tipped with iron. It is generally drawn by oxen, but in Upper Egypt I have seen more than one plough with a camel and a donkey yoked together, a somewhat incongruous pair! The peasant follows on foot, guiding the plough, and usually singing as he works. Except during the inundation the work in the fields is incessant, for, owing to the very fertile soil, one crop can follow another in quick succession.

FIG. 97. A PLOUGH AS USED TO-DAY

The watering of the fields is very strenuous work, the commonest machine used for this purpose being the *shādūf* (see Fig. 13, right, and Fig. 108), a primitive water-hoist. It consists of two upright wooden posts, or pillars, made of mud and *būṣ*, connected by a horizontal bar, across which is slung another bar, or a stout branch of a tree, weighted at one end with mud and stones, while from the other end is suspended a leather or basket-work bucket. The man working the *shādūf* pulls down this bucket into the water (either river or canal), and, when it is full, allows the weighted end to raise it to the level of the land. He then pours the water into a prepared channel, through which it flows in the required direction.

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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smells it unconscious. Evidently the man induces his enemy to come to his house, and the latter, not knowing what has been prepared for him, becomes unconscious from the fumes before he has time to realize the trick played upon him. This method has been tried and has never failed, according to my informant.

In order to restore consciousness the urine of a man must be injected up the nostrils, which, I am told, is a sure restorative. Anyone who makes a fire of this kind must first take a mixture of *semn* (see p. 167) and olive oil, and stuff it up his nostrils to prevent himself also from being overcome by the fumes.

This device is likewise resorted to by people who are travelling across desolate and dangerous spots, where they are liable to meet wild animals. These, on sniffing the fumes from the fire, become unconscious, so that the travellers can pass them by in safety.

One day in 1926 when I was visiting a certain village in Middle Egypt one of my friends there, a very respectable and well-to-do man, came to see me and informed me that he had had several articles stolen from his house, and that he intended to call in the help of a magician who was clever at discovering thieves by means of divination. He invited me to attend the ceremony, which took place a few days later. The magician came from another village a few miles off, and was brought to me to be introduced. I ordered coffee and cigarettes, and after these refreshments had been partaken of we settled down to the business in hand. Some writing-paper was torn into small strips, and a different name, suggested in every case by my friend, was written on each. The magician produced a copy of the Ḳorān, and asked for an iron doorkey. One was brought, which he rejected, as he said it was not native-made. A suitable one, however, was found, and then the magician opened the book at a certain chapter, put in one of the inscribed slips of paper, and inserted the doorkey, leaving the handle of the key outside the book. This book and key were now bound together with string, in such a way as to prevent the key from moving. A pottery saucer containing a charcoal fire was then brought, into which the magician dropped incense. A third man who was present and the magician faced each other on either side of the burning incense, the Ḳorān being suspended by the key on the first finger of the right hand of each man (Fig. 118). The fumes from the incense rose around the Ḳorān, passages from which were recited by the magician. Presently the book began to move, and, according

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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to the direction in which it turned, either to the right or left, the man whose name was inscribed on the piece of paper selected was guilty or not guilty. Several of these strips of paper were tested, and two or three people whose names were written thereon were detected as the thieves. The man whose things had been stolen told me that he had all along suspected these people, but, as

FIG. 118. DIVINATION CEREMONY WITH THE KORĀN TO DETECT A THIEF

they were related to his family, he did not like to prosecute them. They were the poorer members of the family, and were consequently very jealous of their richer relative. The magician employed on this occasion is renowned for his cleverness in such methods of divination, and no one would dream of doubting his decisions.

There is a form of black magic still practised in Egypt by means of human figures made of wax or clay. If a man desires to take his revenge on another who, he considers, has done him a grievous wrong he visits a magician and gets him to make a wax or clay

'AFĀRĪT

years of age, who used to be a village guard. He told a friend of mine that he knew that the ground on which the *'omdeh's* engine now stands used to be the haunt of *'afārīt*, for, when doing patrols at night round the outskirts of the village, he had sometimes seen on that spot a plough pulled by oxen and driven by a man, or sometimes a threshing-machine with the oxen and their driver, all made of fire. As this guard approached them he would cross himself, whereupon the *'afārīt* who had assumed these forms would disappear.

If a woman fears that *'afārīt* are in her house she puts a *ḳulleh* of water on the floor of one of the rooms, and near it she places some bread and salt, leaving them in this position during the night. This protects the whole house, and effectually prevents any *'afārīt* from entering it.

Nightmare and sleepwalking are supposed to be caused by *'afārīt*, and if a child suffers from either of these complaints it is a sign that an *'afrīt* has entered its body. This may have happened because the child has done something wrong; perhaps, so it was suggested to me, it had plucked some of the ears of corn from a field belonging to a neighbour. If a Coptic child sleepwalks or has nightmare its parents call in a priest, who tells them to bring seven *ḳanādīl* (old-fashioned saucer-lamps, with floating wicks). The priest then asks for a jar of water, and prays seven special prayers, burning incense meanwhile in a censer. As he finishes one prayer he puts out one lamp, after a second prayer a second lamp, and so on, till all the prayers are said and all the lamps extinguished. He now tells the parents to place the jar of water on the roof of the house, where it must remain for one night. On the following morning the child is bathed in the water, after which, it is believed, he will be cured.

Among the Muslims if a child is affected in this way the parents go to a magician, who writes a charm of protection for the child to wear.

In addition to his soul (*rōḥ*) every human being is believed to possess an *'afrīt* which leaves his body at death. In certain circumstances it may be a menace to any person who comes near it. Animals also have an *'afrīt*. This belief especially attracted my attention recently. A little dog which had been badly injured took refuge in the bathroom of my house. My servant told me that he was sure it could not live, and that, before it died, he must

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792 During the sheikh ʿAbdu l-Laṭīf's lifetime he was visited on one occasion by the sheikh Sulimān, who resided in a village some miles distant. Wherever he went the sheikh Sulimān was always accompanied by his faithful servant. On the occasion of this visit [198] the two sheikhs conversed together in an unknown language. [150] This roused the curiosity of the sheikh Sulimān's servant, who after the interview asked his master what they had been talking about. The sheikh told him that ʿAbdu l-Laṭīf had remonstrated with him for coming to his village and had bade him remain in his own neighbourhood. Doubtless jealousy was at the root of this ill-feeling.

792 A few days later the servant noticed very early in the morning 786 that his master's fingers were all burned at the tips. He immediately questioned him as to the cause of this injury, and the sheikh told him that it was his custom to go every night to all the sheikhs' tombs in the neighbourhood and light candles for them, and that while he was engaged in this pious work his fingers were burned.

798 The sheikh Sulimān is now dead, but his piety is still remembered. 766 He is buried in his native village, but six other tombs are erected 769 to his memory in various parts of the country. Moreover, the inhabitants of his village hold a *mūlid* every year in his honour.

792 In one of the provinces in Upper Egypt, close to the desert hills, lived the sheikheh Ṣulūḥ. This woman had, during her lifetime, a great reputation for holiness, and people flocked to her, in times of difficulty, from all quarters. Her skin was very dark from constant exposure to the sun, and her head, on which she wore no veil, was covered with a crop of hair, thick and long like the wool of a sheep; from beneath her brows peered dark, sharp-looking eyes. Her clothes were scanty, consisting merely of a piece of linen rag and a sort of coat. She remained out in this desert solitude all day, and at night, so I was told, slept alone "in the mountain." As I have explained, the people call the often precipitous high-desert hills the mountain (*el-gebel*), so she probably [133] took shelter in one of the natural or artificial caves which exist in great numbers in the hillsides.

792 On one occasion, when a number of men and women had come 787 to consult her, one of the former asked her what had become of ● 685 his most valuable camel, which he had lost. The sheikheh at once told him the exact hour in which this loss had occurred, and in-

2: Blackman E-5 (1920-1926) 1927
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formed him that one of his sons had stolen it and had sold it to a man in another village in the same province. She then told him the name of the man who had bought it, and said that if he went to the house of the purchaser he would be able to recover his lost property.

I was told that this information proved to be true, and the man eventually got back the camel which he had lost.

Another man then came forward, and when he had presented the sheikheh with a small sum of money she told him his name and the name of his village, though he was quite unknown to her. She also informed him that he had three sons and one daughter—a perfectly correct statement—and said, moreover, that on his return home he would find that his daughter was ill, this information also proving to be true.

This woman died two or three years ago, and crowds flocked to her funeral, men of all ranks coming to do her honour.

A certain Sheikh Ṣabr is buried in a small village in Middle Egypt, and a tree only marked his resting-place. This tree, which was large and very old, was blown down in 1926. I inquired if a tomb would now be built over the grave, but I was informed that probably no such building would be erected until the sheikh had appeared to some one and commanded him to build for him a domed tomb. I had visited this village on several occasions before the disaster occurred to the sacred tree, and was fortunate enough to secure some good photographs of it. The tree stood at the end of the village, and devotees who came to beg the sheikh to intercede for them so that they might obtain some special benefit, or who wished to be cured of headache or other ailments, would knock a nail into the trunk and then usually twist some of their hair round the nail. A cure, so it was believed, would follow this act. The nails must be virgin-nails—*i.e.*, not used before—and must be of native manufacture. Childless women also visited the tree to be cured of their barrenness. The sheikh Ṣabr is very highly venerated, and a *mūlid*, described on p. 256, is held in his honour once a year.

All these sheikhs were poor men, and the veneration shown to them is due to the virtues they displayed and to their supposed miraculous powers. The high esteem in which they hold their local saints is really good for the peasants, as it sets them some standard of conduct, and gives them a higher ideal of life than mere moneymaking and material success.

be feared. the village may stand on the level of the fields, barely visible, though always very compact.

A village may be situated anywhere. There is always water near, the soil and the contour of the land scarcely vary, so that the geographer cannot lay down hard and fast rules in explanation. History might have something to say on the subject, but who will ever know the past of those four thousand villages scattered far and wide along the Nile Valley? Their congestion, however, can be explained.

Not a square inch of ground must be wasted, especially if it is rich and well watered. In order to keep the cultivated area as large as possible, the unproductive space covered by human dwellings is reduced to a minimum. As we have seen, up to the nineteenth century the land and its cultivators belonged to the State and a few big landowners. The fellaheen had no interest in living on isolated farmsteads, all the more so because in that troubled period plundering Arabs or highway robbers would soon have despoiled them.

Moreover the village was the official unit for taxes, recruiting, judicial enquiries and the survey, so that it was essential for the villagers to remain within it. For these reasons, which still hold good today, the Government would not allow them to settle outside the village area.

These motives are now reinforced by certain new factors, such as the increase of population, the high price of land, and lack of space. The 1907 survey fixed the boundaries of the village areas once and for all.

A village may contain anything from a few hundred to several thousand inhabitants — 15,000 is not an uncommon figure — but it will always seem no more than one large family. Nothing is more like one Egyptian village than another Egyptian village. Here is another example of the monotonous uniformity which we have so often had cause to mention. There is a difference between the villages of Upper and Lower Egypt, as there is between the fellaheen of the two regions, but the likeness between them is far more striking. If an Egyptian of the older generation is shown photographs of several villages and asked whether they belong to Upper Egypt or the Delta, he will frequently give the wrong answer.

This is because the same kind of people and the same manner of life make for the same sort of villages. When

ever be allowed to die of hunger. The mutual help of the men in field-work and of the women in housework, the more readily given as poverty is greater, deserves every commendation. The way in which the fellaheen will work to accomplish something in the common interest, when they are not under orders, shows what they are capable of. Yet when land, a woman, or an *'omda* is in question, rival parties are established and the feud is kept up in every family from generation to generation. Everyone in the village has to take sides. Neutrals are despised. The antagonism, though usually latent, will show itself suddenly over some trivial matter, such as the shifting of a boundary mark, a theft of manure, or a *gamoossa* trespassing. Then human life counts for nothing, and death takes a holiday, especially in villages where there is Arab blood in the fellah's veins.

Thus life is lived in constant insecurity. To feel this, one must spend a night in a village. As soon as night falls precautions are taken against a possible foe. The cattle, including the camel if there is one, are brought indoors and shut in the house. The family also take refuge together behind the great closed door. The head of the house often stays outside watching his field or his water, for the enemy is always on the prowl. As the shadows deepen, the dogs begin to bark and gunshots become frequent.

The shots come not only from the unsleeping watchman, trying to reassure himself and everyone else, but also from fellaheen armed going in defiance of the law. During harvest the fellaheen become even more suspicious, and may be seen with a rifle slung over their shoulders as they stand with their feet in water to gather the last tufts of cotton.

In May 1936 the village of Qalandol was divided into two camps over the selection of an *'omda* — the friends of Mahmud Bakr on the one side, and those of Aly Abbas on the other. Mahmud Bakr made some slanderous remarks about his opponent, and one morning his son was found dead in the fields. A few days later the sister of Aly Abbas was stabbed as a reprisal. After that, for a whole year, both sides watched and waited. Neither work nor journeys were undertaken alone, but always in groups. One market day, when crowds of fellaheen had come from villages near, a young man of the party of Mahmud Bakr was insulted by an opponent, whom he struck. At once the supporters of Aly Abbas

Because the fellah lives entirely in the present, he is neither hurried, nor curious, nor ambitious. He is mild and peaceable because he is patient, and patient because he is subject to men and events, and for these very reasons he is, like the Nile, indifferent rather than idle. He feels no need for constant activity. His mind is passive and fatalistic; he takes things as they come. |81| |183|

At times, however, some fact breaks suddenly through the confused atmosphere of his mind, through this mist that protects him from excess of knowledge or action — as from suicide — and goads him into activity. Then he reacts on the impulse of the moment, without discrimination or sense of proportion, without reckoning the importance of what has happened or thinking of the consequences of what he is doing. His neighbour pinches some of his harvest, a duck, or a fowl. Someone diverts his irrigation water or lets a *gamoossa* loose on his grazing. His son is bullied by another boy or his wife insulted by some other woman. A friend delays too long in returning a few borrowed piastres, or looks too long at his wife. Someone brings a complaint or accusation against him. Then the same fellah who is so patient under the injustice or cruelty of his superiors shows himself to his equals as touchy as can be. The occurrence may be of little or no importance, but it seems to him intolerable and stings him to revenge. He reacts violently, and infects others with the same passion as himself. Human life counts for nothing. |81| |152| |577| |578| [685] [683] [426]

In Upper Egypt, when a man quarrels with another he will try to attack him on the spot with any weapon he can lay his hands on. The fellah of the Sa'id is like a volcano which will erupt when least expected. 579 |81| 578

More usually the revenge is cunningly dissembled, and carried out by night with endless precautions. The enemy will be set upon from behind, in the maize fields; or if the man himself is not attacked his crop will be burnt, his *gamoossa* poisoned, or his corn scattered over the neighbouring fields.

Though the fellah will put up with a multitude of wrongs from his masters when at work, he is not afraid to stand up to them if the dispute is about women, for women and land are the points on which he is most susceptible. Then there |81| |183| 578 562

4:Walker E-4 (no date) 1934 MR13 Fellahin MR13
(ca. 1890)

they thought that the Jinn had killed one of the party, so they began shouting and weeping and bemoaning in a most heart-rending manner. It so happened that the fugitives wandered from the path, and their imaginings drove them into a sheep-fold, in which were the sheep belonging to one of the fellāḥīn. As soon as they entered this enclosure the sheep were scared because of them; but they thought that they were devils, and this groundless imagination was fixed in the minds of some of them to such an extent that they fell upon the ground motionless as if dead. Others began scurrying over the ground; and while the rest were scaling the walls, one of them turned behind him and saw two rams butting each other. He thought they were killing one of his companions who had fainted in the middle of the pen. So he cast himself from the top of the wall to get away from that revolting sight, and fell into a worse and more revolting state, namely, by smashing his legs and his hands.

As for the fraternizing Shaikh, he had taken the opportunity of the emptiness of the house, and he and his servant had stolen the ornaments and garments therein, before they both went outside, fuming and raging at the shamelessness of that person, the jeerer, who was deserving of the anger and displeasure of the Jinn.

Strange to relate when the mistress of the house on the following days perceived the loss of her jewels, she praised Allah, and thanked Him, that the Jinn had not taken anything else. "What would I and my children have done," she said, "if the Jinn had abducted me?" And such absurdities are still remembered and handed down by people who believe in their authenticity.

XII

[p. 33.] SAND DIVINATION (ḌARB AL-RAML)

Most of those engaged in this are Sudanese. One of them will seat himself in the middle of a road near the wall of a house,